

SPLF 2018 Keynote Speech by tomo

Perseverance...

Good morning. Thank you to the owners of South Plains Leatherfest for asking me to speak to you today and to my Master, Ms Rhonda for allowing me to do so. I would also like to thank my boy levi. When I sent the first draft of this speech to levi for his feedback, as I often do with my work, he responded “Frankly Sir, with all due respect, I don’t think you have written your South Plains Keynote yet. It is still inside of you.” Next time boy, tell me how you really feel! Well, I did look deep inside and created what is now on this paper. Thank you boy for pushing me.

It has been a challenging year since I stood on this stage one year ago and stepped down as International slave 2016. I have weathered the death of my closest friend of over 30 years, physical injury, and betrayal that cut me deeply. These trials and my healing in moving on from them have caused me to think about ***perseverance***, what it has meant to me in my life, and how I have persevered as a leather person and as a slave.

Certainly persistence and determination are aspects of our internal resolve that all of us as human beings need to move through our life. We all manage the obstacles that are undoubtedly included in our path. I have been pondering about how struggle and perseverance has affected me as a person, as a slave, as a teacher and as a leader.

Today, as I typically am, I am going to be honest, open, and real. In sharing some thoughts about the challenges I have endured and a thing or two that I learned along the way, it is my hope that you might find inspiration and a few laughs.

As we examine the word perseverance, I'd like to begin by recognizing this very event. Being the 20th Anniversary of South Plains Leatherfest, my gratitude goes Mark Frazier, Master Jim, slave marsha, and Sir Cougar. It takes a lot of work to start an event and even more to keep it going for two decades. Producers face on-going challenges they must endure, such as teenage cheer leaders scheduled in the hotel on the same weekend as your leather event, just to name one of the many.

Twenty years ago, I was also a bit busy. In that same year, I founded two organizations; one in the leather community and one in the martial arts community, both of which are also celebrating anniversaries in 2018. In 1998, four leatherdykes got together and decided there should be a leather organization for women who are into wearing uniforms. We believed in honor, integrity, discipline, and hot uniforms and wanted to have a place for ourselves and others who enjoyed the same thing, and so the Dyke Uniform Corps was born.

A word of advice to anyone who would like to form a club – take a very close look at the acronym that represents your club's name. Otherwise you might be forever stuck correcting people from calling your club an unfavorable name such as DUCKS and need to constantly remind them it is D period U period C period!

In thinking about South Plains and the D.U.C., I had my boy levi do some research and make a list for me of all the groups and events in our community that have been around more than 20 years. My intent was to share what I imagined to be a very short list with you here today. I was pleasantly surprised at the results of his research. He found over 100 organizations and events that have been in existence for more than 20 years. I am grateful to the perseverance of each leader who has worked countless and often thankless hours to provide these opportunities for kinship.

I have heard it often said in the M/s community that "it takes a village", which I have come to interpret that our chosen way of life is not an easy one and therefore we rely on each other for support. I certainly know this to be true in my world.

This past Christmas morning, I was sitting in our living room after the big present reveal. The room was still scattered with wrapping paper, the grandkids playing with one toy after the next. I stole a few moments to enjoy one of my own gifts. I sat quietly among the chaos and began reading Former Secretary of State and Presidential Candidate Hillary Clinton's book, What Happened. I smiled when I found that the opening chapter was titled Perseverance. I think she stole a line from my book.

On the opposing page from the Chapter Heading was a quote from one of my favorite movies *A League of Their Own* which is about the first American professional women's baseball league. The quote was *"It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great."*

I chuckled then thought, is this true of Master slave relationships? Is it the hard that makes it great? Is the life of a Master or slave really that difficult?

Certainly I believe the life of a Master can be challenging. Taking complete ownership, control and responsibility for another human being is a great endeavor, filled with both joy and struggle. The surrender required of a slave is not an easy undertaking either – I can for sure speak to that.

But – isn't this precisely what we are drawn to? Isn't this way of life exactly what we need? I know it is what I need, and while my Master often insists I don't know the difference between WANT and NEED, in this case, I think I do.

In a life where I am most always in charge, dominant, designing, implementing, driven in my quadruple A ways... my inner self as a slave, is where I find balance. The surrender that this relationship choice requires is actually one of my most centered places.

Finding my center, seeking and gaining balance on firm ground during a storm were skills I learned early on out of necessity. From needs of survival, I acquired skills in determination at a very young age.

At 18 years old, two days after graduating high school, I was tragically forced to leave the home of my parents. I had arrived at home after work one evening and confronted by my parents who had found a written letter from my then first girlfriend. I was unexpectedly out-ed at a time I was still trying to figure out who I was. I was threatened, accused, demeaned and beaten by my step-father while my mother watched - all of which combined brought out earlier memories of child abuse I had buried deep within. I left my childhood home physically injured, literally limping down the road and emotionally devastated. I was rescued by friends, helped by family and survived that tragedy.

I went on to put myself financially through college, graduating with a four year degree, on-time. I took a full load of classes, worked a part-time job, and played Division I sports. I also found the time to find a few more girlfriends.

College was never something I saw as fun. It was a means to an end – something I needed to get through to obtain a job to support myself. It actually already felt like a job. I developed coping skills that I use still today. When it gets hard, I work harder. Through these experiences of my young adulthood, I learned tirelessness, resilience, and my stubbornness developed.

The early years of child abuse followed by the traumatic departure from the home of my parents at such a young age left me with scars, that while healed on the surface to this day cover deep injuries. While these injuries are not always visible, they sometimes show the ugly remnants left behind, that I must be mindful of and navigate.

As a student and teacher of the martial art of laido (the way of the Japanese sword) these layers of hurt and healing remind me of my sword. It is forged with layer upon layer of steel. Each layer folds over itself and is pounded down to create a new layer, developing additional strength each time. I find that in my life, my own layers have been developed by self-awareness and understanding that help me to manage the injuries I was left with around trust and intimacy. While surrender as I said earlier is my most centered place, it is also often the most challenging to reach.

I kept one of the girlfriends I found shortly after college and we are still together 25 years later. She rocked my vanilla monogamous lesbian world and introduced me to Leather, Poly, and D/s.

Embracing poly, I also began what turned into a 12 year D/s relationship with a Dominant. This Dominant began a relationship with his own peer partner, a woman who was the first Master I had ever met, and my introduction to the M/s community. This time in my life was both exciting and challenging. Belonging to a dominant couple was at times VERY HOT. The challenges that developed however, far outweighed the hotness.

I had thought that D/s was fun, fulfilling, and made for hot sex, however, having found M/s, I understood what had been missing. I realized that I was a slave, and that it was M/s that I needed in my life.

There were several challenges to this discovery. Just as I was trying to figure out what being a slave meant to me, I was told by the very person I so desperately wanted to serve that I could not be her slave and would never be her slave. I was told I was not a slave. I was confused, hurt, and disoriented.

There was also the issue of the dominant I had belonged to who thought we had a good thing going with our D/s relationship. I am certain when I realized that D/s was not enough for me, that I broke his heart.

This led down a road of surviving a dominant who was a liar and manipulator, and a Master who abdicated responsibility for the emotional duress I was left with, not to mention this newfound slave inside of me that I had no idea what to do with. I managed to end the relationships, and move forward from this poly implosion despite my deepest buttons being pressed about loyalty and devotion. I found closure on my own, and I endured.

It was a dark time in my life. How did I get through it?

In a word – therapy.

In another word – community.

I was desperate to fill the void of service and find a distraction from the pain. I sent an email to my friend of many years Glenda Rider and said “Hey Glenda, I know you are producing International Ms Leather and I have some free time on my hands, can I help out”? Glenda wrote back and suggested I send her some ideas about what I might be able to contribute and I did.

Being the over achiever that I am, I sent her a resume. What Glenda had not known was that I had been producing martial arts events for a decade. When she read my resume, within 10 minutes, the phone rang. She asked me if I wanted to join International Ms Leather as a Producer, and I said yes.

My community saved me.

My community welcomed me, held me up, and kept me going. On the days I could barely get out of bed, I pulled myself up drawn to the joy I found in the dozens of IMsL tasks I was juggling, to the satisfaction of creating space for leatherdykes and giving to my community.

MY COMMUNITY SAVED ME and I will be forever grateful.

During the very first IMsL staff conference call that I participated on, one of the staff members caught my attention. She was incredibly smart, organized, firm, yet had a tone of kindness in her manner. We started flirting during that very call. As you may have guessed, I am speaking of my Master, Ms Rhonda.

It would be impossible for me to tell you about my work in learning how to be a slave while recovering from internal emotional injury without telling you about my Master. I am so incredibly grateful to have a patient, loving, yet firm Master who provides leadership with compassion and has helped me immensely with my personal struggle. I am thankful to belong to her and am so fortunate to be her slave.

Yet, I will not stand on this stage and speak of perfection or paint a picture of a Master slave relationship that may cause some in the audience to wonder “how is that achievable?” No, our Master slave relationship is real. It has ups and downs, fun times, hot times, and difficult times and yet...regardless of the source of the struggle, we persevere together.

I have a small stone with an engraved word on it that lives on my desk. It was a gift from my Master many years ago. It says “teamwork”. On those days when I feel like we are on opposite teams and I have lost my perspective of us being a team together, I take out that stone and hold it. I feel the permanence of the engraving in the stone and think about what I signed up for, what my goals are, why I have chosen this life and who gave me that stone. It helps me to re-gain my center and reminds me that though we have different positions on the field, my Master and I are a team.

Our teamwork was tested in the early years of our relationship. I was so deeply injured when we met, I had no business getting into another relationship. However, you meet people when you meet them, and you do your best to find your way given where you are in your life and what baggage you are carrying. Ma'am used to call me (and still does sometimes) her lion with a thorn in its paw. We worked together to learn about each other, our needs, our hurts, our desires. We talked a lot. She was integral in my recovery and healing and still is to this day.

We worked on IMsL together and produced it for 7 years. Then, we got this crazy idea to run for a title. Our perseverance was tested early on in the title process. One of our most difficult struggles as titleholders had its source during the Northwest Regional Contest. We were treated so poorly by the judging panel, that had it been an option, we would not have run at the International contest. Being people that keep our word and our commitments, we supported each other, reached out to members of our community for advice and persevered.

During our International Title Year, we heard similar stories to ours over and over during our title year from other contestants and titleholders from around the country who were mistreated during the contest process. Building community is a responsibility that falls on each of us. We have contests and titleholders to provide representation within our communities. Treating contestants poorly does not fulfill our obligation to build community.

Our contestants should be treated with respect and evaluated as to whether they can do the job of representing us. Questions should be asked in a manner that reflects a job interview, because that is what this process is. As a judge, I am mindful to put my ego away, speak with kindness, and include manners during my inquiry and I ask other judges to do the same. Please honor the effort of contestants and do not confuse vetting with hazing. Together we can have a selection process that is thorough and tough, yet tempered with compassion and respect.

We believe in this title system and it is very important to us. In shifting to this focus during our contests, we will invite more members of our community to step forward and run for our titles, therefore building and strengthening our community. I know that during our title year, we impacted many lives and continue to do so. That intimate contact with members of our community has helped me personally to persevere and I know has helped others.

Being titleholders brought new challenges to our life as Master and slave. Our International Title year and the year following it were not easy. We were not immune to the exhaustion, pressure, fear of failure, and challenge to find a balance of the priorities in our life that many titleholders experience.

About six months into our year, my Master tore a tendon in her ankle and as many of you saw, spent quite a few events in a boot and wheelchair. What I found out 2 weeks after we stepped down last year was that I also had a tear in the same tendon in my ankle, and found myself in a boot for months. Finding the humor in this, I must point out that Ms Rhonda flagged her walking boot on the left ankle, and mine appropriately was worn on the right.

The travel of a regional and international year was hard. Was it a wonderful experience and one that I would do again, yes. However to think that a titleholder year is JUST fun would be misguided. We struggled, physically and emotionally. Yet it was our bond as Master and slave that carried us on those hard days. It was my devotion to my Master and to my community that helped me continue during the moments I wanted to walk away.

We all have challenges in our relationships. I have watched people struggle with conflict, addiction, breakdowns within leather and poly families, and death of the Master or slave.

For us, we have found that it is the commitment and devotion to ourselves, to each other, and to our community that keeps us going. We rely on our deep resolve to be who we are to each other and to community that helps us to persevere on the days that are most difficult.

Over the years, I have witnessed that we are an incredible group of people providing unity and identity. The Master slave Community has a solid place on which to stand, a rich history, and its place in the leather community.

The communities that we believe in have persevered, and will continue to do so. Regardless of the current administration in this country and resulting attacks that are aimed our way, regardless of the bullies of this world that we must out-endure, we will not be silenced, we will not disappear, and we will prevail.

For me, moving forward with my devotion has required self-reflection about my struggles, compassion with self and others, and knowing where to find support when life becomes hard. Some days, it is a Harry Potter marathon. Other days I rely on the unshakable love of my partner, the support of my Master, my leather family, and my friends who I can trust with my hardest truths. I look to my community to support me and hold me. Time and time again, my community has held me up and helped me to not only persevere, but to thrive.

All of us, right here in this room, are bonded together.

We are our community.

Together, we are stronger and in support each other we live as Masters and slaves because ***it IS hard*** and ***it's also great.***

Thank you.